

De Limburger

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(Translated from Dutch)

A black rider who won -- that took some getting used to in Maastricht

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*Major Taylor was a sensation on the bike
Image: Getty Images*

In 1902, the Maastricht cyclist Harie Meijers fought a dogged duel in his hometown with the famous American black sprinter Major Taylor. That someone of color could be superior to a white person, that took some getting used to. "It was therefore very painful for the Limburgers that their favorite and fellow Limburger lost out against a negro."

From the air you may, quite possibly, discover a thin oval line in the landscape next to the De Geusselt football stadium in Maastricht. It is the only tangible reminder of the now overgrown cycling track in Amby, where famous cycling races were held last century. About one of those competitions, more than 118 years ago, a book was even published a

few years ago ('Major Taylor races through the Netherlands' by Jan Mulder), with a theme that is now particularly topical: the position of the black athlete in a predominantly white society.

At the beginning of the last century, the Maastricht cycling star Harie Meijers caused a stunt by bringing the black athlete Major Taylor to his hometown. Meijers and American champion Taylor were among the best track cyclists in the world. In fact, the Maastricht resident was the first Dutch Olympic champion in cycling. At the time, track cycling was much more highly regarded than road cycling, and Meijers traveled the world as a professional cyclist.

Sick

During a tour of America around 1900, he would meet rival Marshall "Major" Taylor in Florida, but the American was ill and promised to come to Limburg one day. Taylor fulfilled his promise on May 13, 1902.

The archives do not contain much information about his sprints in the Netherlands. Although Taylor's biography mentions the encounters in Maastricht, the question is how reliable those notes are. For example, the American talks about perfect weather, while on May 13 it rained hard and was cold. However, a postcard has been found that Major Taylor sent to his wife from Maastricht. On the front is the "Canal from Maastricht to Liège." The text is not very romantic, rather an average text: Hello dear, how are you?

Fortunately, historian Mulder decided to dig into this remarkable tour. And of course the Limburg newspapers also wrote about the meeting: Taylor would not be special if he were not a negro. It was a first for Maastricht, where no one had ever seen a person with a dark skin color.

Baked in

Racism was very ingrained at that time. Nationality was mentioned for riders such as the Dane Ellegaard and Meijers; for Taylor it was stated in brackets: negro. But reporters did not hold back in the descriptions either. "The public finds that this Negro is black, if properly, white in eyes and white in teeth, when he smiles - as befits our black natural man since ancient tradition." So wrote the *Algemeen Handelsblad* upon Taylor's arrival in the Netherlands. Or: "The negro is not big, but a slender, snappy, neatly built guy with chocolate legs like a sturdy ground beetle." You wouldn't get away with that kind of writing now. Back then it was normal.

Taylor endured racism throughout his career and life. For example, the League of American Wheelmen limited amateur membership to whites, and Taylor was regularly refused admission to hotels and restaurants.

Extra Transport

Back to the race in Amby. There were a lot of spectators from Belgium (Liège) and Germany (Aachen). The day before the competition, the Limburg newspapers reported that extra transportation was even being used between Hasselt and Dutch Limburg. Mulder writes that there weren't a lot of people from Maastricht itself. So Maastricht was already a "real sports city" back then. And also remarkable: there were no journalists from national newspapers present.

In between showers, Taylor and Meijers battled out three sprints. Taylor won 2-1 and over the years that victory has come to be viewed as a beating for the Dutchman, but the reports show that the sprint finishes were very close.

Things got fierce at times and the crowd booed Taylor. The following day, De Nederlandsche Sport magazine wrote, somewhat bitterly: "It was therefore very painful for the Limburgers that their favorite and fellow Limburger lost out against a negro."

Wanderer

After the clash in Maastricht, Taylor moved on through Europe, with races in Turin, Cologne and Paris, where he met Meijers again. Then the turnout from Maastricht was better. Taylor would win many races in the next ten years, but just as often he was confronted with racism. For example, he stopped racing for a while in 1904 after he was refused for the umpteenth time in a hotel, Mulder writes. After a series of unfortunate business investments, Taylor ended up moving to Chicago. He died at the age of 53.

Where there is much to find out about Taylor, Meijers' life remains largely unknown. Both Mulder and Bennie Ceulen, cycling fanatic and journalist at De Limburger for decades, searched for details, but did not find much. Strangely enough, Meijers, best described as the Tom Dumoulin of his era, fell into oblivion. Even his profession after his cycling career is unclear. Some sources report that he was the son of a coffee merchant, but in De Limburger and Mulder's book, Meijer's father was a brewer and Harie took over the business on Bosch Street. In 1928 Meijers died from the effects of typhus. He was only 48 years old.

Last year a path was named after him at the Dousberg holiday park, but otherwise the memories of Meijers are largely overgrown, just like the cycling track of Amby.